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Addressing the Humanitarian and Security Crises in Al-Hawl

by [Kenneth R. Rosen](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Kenneth R. Rosen](#)

Kenneth R. Rosen is the journalist-in-residence at the Washington Institute and a senior editor at Newsweek based in Italy. His latest book is “Bulletproof Vest” (Bloomsbury).



Brief Analysis

As international support lags and the situation in al-Hawl and the surrounding areas deteriorates, repatriation and humanitarian assistance are increasingly vital.

A camp is not a home. Yet for roughly 62,000 people—including an estimated 27,000 children—the al-Hawl camp in Syria has become a permanent way-station, constituting what Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has called a “mini-state.” The camp boasts currency exchanges, medical facilities, and sundry stores. But al-Hawl is also home to some of the most concentrated violence in northern Syria since the deconstruction of the ISIS caliphate in early 2019. Repatriation of foreign citizens and an increase in humanitarian assistance are two key parts to addressing this danger.

The camp predates the war with ISIS, opening in 1991 during the Gulf War to house Iraqis displaced by fighting. It was re-purposed in 2016 during the global coalition’s fight against ISIS to host displaced Iraqis and Syrians, but captured families of ISIS fighters also became residents as the Islamic State collapsed. Currently, the camp is sectioned into nine different communities, eight of which house Syrian and Iraqi internally displaced persons, while the ninth—itsself divided into five communities—holds ISIS families. Repatriation of foreign fighters and their families, while important, therefore cannot be the only solution, especially since many of al-Hawl’s residents are Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

Though the Kurdish-led and U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are tasked with maintaining security in the

camp, the ISIS supporters in the camp—wives, widows and children of militants—rely on the violence of the camps to assert dominance over the forces.

Inside al-Hawl, ISIS sleeper cells taunt and stalk potential victims. Residents are beheaded, shot, or injured by grenades; in one instance, a police officer was killed with a silencer-equipped pistol. In the first three months of the year, nearly 40 men and women have been killed, including a Doctors Without Borders staff member and two children.

The ongoing violence recently led to SDF raids. On March 26, the SDF launched a series of raids at the camp, arresting more than 53 residents and capturing a member of ISIS leadership—Abu Saad Al-Iraqi—according to Col. Wayne Marotto, the official spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve. Also uncovered were the names of 4,089 residents associated with ISIS.

Following the raid, SDF commander General Mazloun tweeted that countries must “take back their citizens and provide more humanitarian support.” Humanitarian assistance and activities were suspended during the raid, and though some of those operations have resumed, it is unclear if all have been able to resume functioning. During the raid, NGO property was ransacked, a school burned, a childcare facility damaged, and an administrative building “damaged,” according to one internal report.

Humanitarian organizations working in the camp emphasize the dangers of allowing the current situation to continue. “We are worried that security concerns are taking precedence over humanitarian and medical needs. Regardless of people's background, nationality, status and origin of displacement, everyone is entitled to access healthcare and humanitarian assistance in a timely manner,” Will Turner, MSF's emergency manager for Syria, said. “Humanitarian assistance to al-Hawl camp must continue and be scaled up, and aid organizations must be provided with unhindered access to all parts of the camp. People forced to live in the camp must be treated in a fair, dignified, and humane way, with unhindered access to humanitarian services, in line with international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles.”

For many, one principal way of easing the security burden on the SDF and the humanitarian situation in the camps is the repatriation of the approximately 10,000 foreign citizens from the camp who hail from 57 nations.

While Russia and Kazakhstan have repatriated more than 200 citizens since 2019, the overall repatriation of foreign nationals—including children—has trickled, in part due to complications arising from the coronavirus pandemic. Countries that have delayed this repatriation process have also cited a lack of international legal framework, including issues related to evidence and short sentence guidelines, for expatriate detention and expatriation trials for some of the difficulties in returning their citizens.

Western nations like France have also argued that their citizens who committed crimes with the Islamic State should be tried in the countries in which they committed their crimes. There is some precedent for this—in 2019, seven French citizens were sentenced to death by hanging in Iraq. More to the point, public opinion in these countries rarely supports the return of radicals or their children. A December poll conducted in France found that 89 percent of respondents were against the idea of repatriation.

France has prioritized the removal of orphans and children whose mothers have agreed to separate with their child, as in the case of a 7-year-old who was flown to France for urgent medical care.

Though an ongoing issue, U.S. officials have recently called for both greater international aid and intervention, pressuring European nations in particular to take back their citizens. “We urge the international community to consider how they might support both humanitarian agencies who are providing to those populations now, as well as consider the repatriation of their own citizens in order to help relieve the burden on our local partners,” Acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS John Godfrey said in late March.

Meanwhile, little is being done to address living situations that humanitarian and human rights organizations call “inhumane.” The situation outside of al-Hawl likewise suggests little optimism for Syrians and Iraqis looking to return home. The surrounding governorate of Deir Ezzour has a deteriorating security situation and a crippled economy where work is sparse or underpaid. A growing stigmatization of those who’ve lived in the camp for the past few years has also created a combustible situation in areas once considered home. “Syria is not a safe country to return to,” the European Parliament said in March in a resolution urging the repatriation of children from the camp, adding further difficulty to convincing residents of a safe return.

Even so, time is of the essence when it comes to al-Hawl. Repatriating children in particular should be a priority for countries with vested interest in their national security, especially as repatriating children to safer nations prevents further radicalization. Those who may be tried for war crimes and crimes against humanity can contribute to the growing legal body of prosecutions against non-state actors in the Syrian Civil War, now entering its eleventh year. Likewise, increased humanitarian assistance to al-Hawl given the dangers faced by its refugee residents is vital to addressing the living situation there. As the Syrian Human Rights Observatory notes, the current practice of doing nothing inflames an already “clear and present danger to everyone.” ❖



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THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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